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December 3, 1974
OCI No. 1639/74

(16)

MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: Syria's Negotiating Tactics

Since the Middle East war in 1973, the Syrians have twice risked provoking full-scale fighting in order to force the pace of negotiations: first, by waging a war of attrition last spring and, second, by waiting until almost the last moment before agreeing last week to renew the mandate of UN forces stationed on the Golan Heights.

This brinkmanship reinforces the opinion of many observers that of the principal antagonists Syria is the most likely to start or provoke another major war in the Middle East. Yet Syrian leaders continue to show an interest in supporting efforts to solve the Arab-Israeli conflict peacefully as long as these efforts offer them hope of regaining territory Syria lost in 1967 and of resolving the Palestinian problem.

During Secretary Kissinger's visit to Damascus in early November, President Asad invited his attention to a speech Asad had just given at the Arab summit conference. Although the Syrian president warned at Rabat that Syria was ready to fight if there were no other way to right perceived wrongs of the past, his speech was notable for the stress put on Syria's desire for peace.

What accounts, then, for the Syrians' often bellicose behavior?

In part, it stems from the general Syrian approach to negotiations. They pride themselves on their bargaining skills and enter each negotiating round clearly determined to extract as much as they can.

More important is the Syrians' perception that Egypt enjoys negotiating advantages that they do not. They are acutely aware of President Sadat's desire for another Sinai withdrawal, and of the Israelis' inclination to oblige him.

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Consequently, Asad has felt it necessary to remind Egypt and others of Syria's trouble-making potential as a way of ensuring that Syria's interests will not be slighted.

Although Egypt and Syria fought together against Israel in the October war, the two have often acted since then more like adversaries. Syrian distrust of Sadat is deeply rooted; they have an abiding fear he might be tempted into a separate deal with Israel that would leave Syria isolated and weak. This attitude is not without foundation. Over the past year, Sadat has frequently acted on his own and consulted the Syrians only as an afterthought.

Asad was surprised and upset, for example, by Sadat's acceptance of the UN cease-fire resolution of October 22, 1973. He believes that Egypt weakened Syria's negotiating position by concluding a disengagement accord with Israel before a similar agreement had been worked out for the Golan front.

The Syrians were again taken aback when Sadat--without coordinating with Syria--acknowledged King Husayn last July as the representative of Palestinians living in Jordan and supported Husayn's desire to go next in negotiations with Israel.

It is not surprising, therefore, that Asad has tried to curb Cairo's freedom of action and to force Sadat to recognize that he must act in concert with Syria. This was a key Syrian objective at the Rabat summit meeting in October.

The Syrians let it be known from the start of the summit that they opposed another round of bilateral negotiations between Egypt and Israel. Foreign Minister Khaddam put forward a resolution aimed specifically at barring such negotiations.

In face of stiff Egyptian opposition, the Syrians settled for a watered-down declaration that none of the Arab front-line states would conclude a unilateral final settlement with Israel. Some reports suggest Syria may have obtained private assurances that Egypt would push for the resumption of the Geneva conference, or--concurrent with any new Egyptian-Israeli talks--for another Israeli withdrawal from the Golan.

Domestic considerations are another factor in the Syrian attitude. It is almost a truism that Asad must tread more cautiously than Sadat in negotiations with Israel because

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Asad's internal position is not as secure. Although the October war bolstered Asad's personal popularity and prestige, the ruling Baath party is not popular, and Asad must cope with party factionalism that involves ideological differences, as well as sectarian rivalries between the country's Sunni Muslim majority and Asad's smaller but politically dominant Alawite sect.

Asad could not, for example, have reversed himself on the PLO-Jordan issue as Sadat did last summer, without drawing heavy fire from the ranks of the Baath party. No Syrian leader--however moderate and pragmatic--can afford to disregard the Palestinian cause any more than he can afford to demand less than a complete withdrawal of Israeli forces from the Golan Heights.

Compared with other Syrian strongmen, Asad should be in a good position to negotiate with Israel. The military is his main base of support. He is a career air force officer himself, and was one of the founding members of the military wing of the Baath party that has dominated Syrian politics for nearly a decade.

Most of Syria's field commanders and top military brass, including Minister of Defense Talas and Chief of Staff Shihabi, are longtime associates and supporters. Asad's brother commands a formidable security force stationed on the outskirts of Damascus as a deterrent to would-be coup plotters.

This does not mean that Asad can ignore dissident groups in the party and army, especially if negotiations go sour. He had to boycott the Geneva peace talks last December because of domestic opposition, and he had to make a major effort to win party approval before he could negotiate a disengagement agreement with Israel in the spring.

More recently, Asad is said to have delayed renewing the UN mandate in part to assuage Baath party numbers dissatisfied with the long lull in negotiations.

Syria's leaders apparently share the Egyptian view that the US holds the key to a negotiated settlement in the Middle East. One of the reasons Egypt and Syria went to war in 1973 was said to be to force the US to take a more active role in persuading Israel to make concessions.

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The Asad government would also like to see the country opened up to Western--including US--investors in hopes of accelerating economic development. The government has been encouraging Syrian businessmen to renew their contacts in the West.

Asad is more skeptical than Sadat, however, about Washington's ability to extract the necessary concessions from Israel. As a consequence, he has hedged his bets on US peace efforts, carefully preserving Syria's relationship with Moscow.

The Syrians are capable of ignoring Soviet advice when it suits them, but Asad has in general treated the Soviets with deference since the war. In the last eight months he has made at least two visits to Moscow to consult with the Soviet leadership at an important point in negotiations. He has been more insistent than the Soviets themselves that the Geneva peace conference be reconvened.

This approach has paid off handsomely for Syria. The Soviets have responded generously to Syrian requests for arms; MIG-23s, T-62 tanks, and possibly Scud missiles have been added to the Syrian arsenal.

Asad sees Syria's relations with the two superpowers in terms of their use to him. Therefore, as long as he believes that it is in Syrian interests, he is likely to continue to try to improve relations with the US for whatever economic benefits and negotiating advantage he can obtain. At the same time, he will continue to cater to Soviet sensitivities in order to retain Soviet backing for Syrian negotiating demands and to ensure Syria a reliable source of arms in case of war.

With the renewal of the mandate for the UN observer forces on the Golan Heights for another six months, a largely Syrian-contrived crisis has been eased. Asad may now be amenable to letting the Egyptians negotiate another Israeli withdrawal from the Sinai, but it seems most unlikely that he would accede to this without conditions satisfactory to Damascus.

Asad really wants the negotiations to move back to Geneva, where he can count on Soviet support as a check on the Egyptians. On top of this, Asad may genuinely believe that Geneva is the only place to take up the hard political questions that have to be addressed--the Palestinian problem, concessions for future Israeli withdrawals, and the future of Jerusalem.

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If negotiations remain stalled, the Syrians will reconsider their options. From all indications, Asad and his key military advisers are not eager to take on the Israelis militarily, especially without Egypt. Six months from now, or even sooner, they may feel differently and so may the Egyptians. The possibility of another and more destructive war of attrition has not been ruled out by the Syrians.

The Syrians are almost certain to seek assurances from King Faysal that another oil embargo would be imposed if the Israelis--in the Arabs' view--continue to procrastinate. Faysal, incidently, is planning a rare visit to Damascus early in January.

January may well be a month of decision for Syria and the other Arabs. Soviet party Secretary Brezhnev will be making a tour of principal Arab capitals, and the Arab leaders will have had time to take stock after the Rabat summit and after the successes of the Palestine Liberation Organization at the UN. Syria will demand and probably get a greater say in these decisions.

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